

ELDER LAW UPDATE

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Internet Resources Empower Long-Distance Caregivers

Long-distance caregivers should plan time for listening to problems and use resources to handle some of them.

By Sandy Mau

John is 82 and lives in Manhattan. Since the death of his brother, he regularly checks on his 87-year-old sister-in-law who lives about 90 minutes away. She has dementia and needs help with daily needs. An aide lives with her, but John is concerned the help is getting burned out. The last time John visited he noticed his sister-in-law's condition was worsening, and he wonders what he can do to help.

John is a long-distance caregiver, one of an estimated 6.9 million Americans who care for someone living at least an hour away, according to a study by MetLife and AARP. Americans age 85 and older numbered 4.2 million in 2000, the fastest growing segment of the population according to the National Institute on Aging. By mid-century, as baby boomers transition from being the caregiver to needing care, that segment is estimated to swell to 21 million.

"This is a national problem with local solutions," says Nora Jean Levin, executive director of Caring From a Distance (CFAD), a non-profit organization for distance caregivers. CFAD's Web site, www.cfad.org, extends resources and advice to caregivers like John who e-mail their questions and concerns or search the site's many resources and links. Help from CFAD is also available by telephone at (202) 895-9465. CFAD helped John consider other solutions such as assisted living, finding adult day care facilities and calling a home care agency to arrange to give the live-in

help a break.

Levin understands that despite the obstacles of time and miles, distance caregivers are in a unique position to help.

"Long distance caregivers can offer perspective because they aren't on the scene every day to really observe small changes, and that perspective is very valuable," she says. "Sometimes if you're in a care situation day after day, you feel overwhelmed and hopeless and you can't see out of that box. But a person who comes in from the outside can help pinpoint a problem and recommend ways to help improve the situation."

Levin offers these tips to buoy long-distance caregivers:

1. Offer help. Lend a hand solving problems that daily caregivers may not have time to think about. Shop for gadgets that help with daily needs, like telephones with large buttons or "grabber" devices that help seniors reach items they need. Make arrangements for a handicapped permit. If appropriate, help manage finances and pay bills.

2. Don't be a "swooper." It's really hard when you're the daily caregiver and the long distance caregiver swoops in and tries to change everything. Instead, plan time for listening to problems and perhaps for handling a few, and spend quality time with your loved one.

3. Make observations, but be careful how you share them. “Retain respect for the individual who needs care, and be mindful of preserving personal dignity when every step towards dependence may be viewed as loss of control,” Levin suggests.

4. Visit and look for changes that indicate a need for more care. Is your loved one eating regularly? Is personal hygiene slipping? Are prescriptions unfilled or forgotten? A helpful checklist, “Ten Warning Signs: Your Older Family Member May Need Help” can be found at <http://www.cfad.org/library/HolidayFactSheetFinal.pdf>.

5. Use the Internet to ease a transition. “Transitions can be rough or smooth, depending on the nature of the situation, whether it’s a crisis or something that’s been coming gradually, and the nature of the person being cared for,” Levin says. Transitions to senior housing are smoothest when approached proactively, before a crisis arises.

For example, long-distance caregivers can screen more than 60,000 housing options online by visiting www.snapforseniors.com. The SNAPforSeniors online search tool is like the Multiple Listing Service for senior housing. Long-distance caregivers can narrow the search by geographic location, care needs, type of facility and personal amenities.

A new tool from SNAPforSeniors and the Alzheimer’s Association, the Caregiver Conversation Checklist, helps families discussing housing options. The checklist, which can be found on alz.org, offers tips for determining if long-term care is appropriate and explains how to broach the conversation.

“The possibilities offered by the Internet to help long distance caregivers are fabulous, and we’ve made our Web site a portal for people looking for solutions,” Levin says. “SNAPforSeniors is a site designed to help families deal with the

housing part of the picture. Long-distance caregivers can also get help from CFAD when investigating other local personal and community-based resources like home care, daily money managers, eldercare lawyers, or geriatric care managers to coordinate activities or even where you can donate a wheelchair.”

This article is provided by SNAPforSeniors, the most current and comprehensive senior housing resource in the nation. Start a free search in your area at www.snapforseniors.com. NOTE: SNAPforSeniors requires this statement to be included as part of their reprint permission.

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